

Some Notes on the Score

THE AGONY OF MODERN MUSIC.

By Henry Pleasants. 180 pp. New York: Simon & Schuster. \$3.

By ARTHUR BERGER

THIS has been an age in which composers have been uncommonly articulate in prose. What they write about much of the time is the crisis through which music has recently been passing. Their writings, according to Henry Pleasants, seal their own doom. By quoting from them whatever suits his thesis, by interpreting in the most negative fashion their healthy inquiry into the state of music, by taking their parochial quarrels as criteria of the inadequacy of this trend or that, and by imagining a fantastic plot between critics and composers to promote an artificial condition of creative sterility, he has tried to show, in a manner obviously contrived to irritate the professional world, that the crisis has not been overcome, that "modern music is not modern and is rarely music."

Formerly music editor of The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, Mr. Pleasants who now contributes frequently to The Times on European musical events, ostensibly lends authority to what certain listeners have long deluded themselves into believing on their own. But with this approval come implications they must also face. For music is viewed here as ideally "a spontaneous invention by practicing musicians," which places a composer on the level of wandering minstrel. Mr. Pleasants not only claims that "the evolution of Western music continues in American popular music" rather than in today's "serious" music, but he also infers that the art was already in decline with Mozart and Haydn, since by their time works were mostly written down as they were to be played, and improvisation on the performer's part, such as we again find in jazz, was pretty much restricted to the concerto cadenza.

The final débâcle is traced to 1910 or so when resources of tonality were exhausted. Two alternatives presented themselves: reinstatement of earlier principles (so-called "neo-clas-

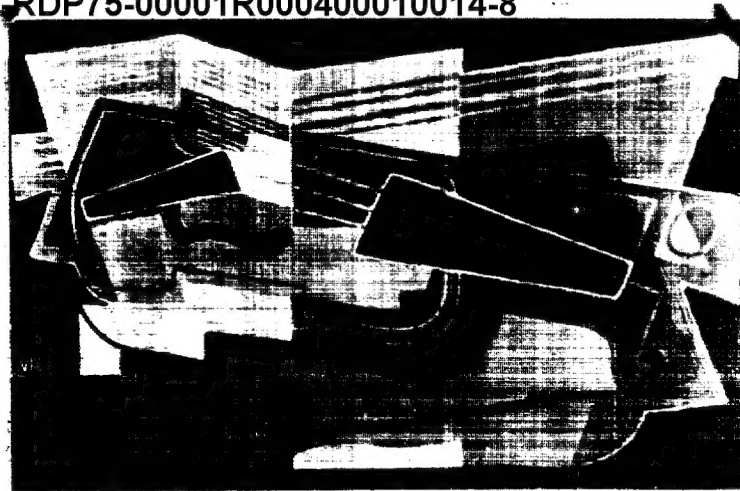
sicism") and the twelve-tone method. Both are characterized as failures with the support of a quotation from Roger Sessions, interpreted by Mr. Pleasants as a "euphemistic way" of confessing "harmonic suicide" which resulted in "inability to speak musically at all." A little matter of a few dots where portions of the original were conveniently omitted deprives us of this composer's views, contrary to those of this book, that Schoenberg, Bartok and Stravinsky were "extraordinary," that they not only "posed the questions" faced today but also provided "the first solutions."

MR. PLEASANTS' reasoning, not unlike Tolstoy's, is that the greatest music is what immediately appeals to the greater number. He buttresses this with reviews and success stories (mostly of nineteenth-century vintage), as if there were any doubt that some recognition during a composer's life were a condition to immortality. But an artist has failures, too, and in deploring their frequent citation Mr. Pleasants underestimates them as a warning that no single audience or critic is infallible. In today's society an artist too sensitive to fight back might even be lost to posterity or his profounder works (like Beethoven's last quartets) may be least appreciated while he lives.

It is odd that the author ignores old Viennese operetta which, though it was not improvised, presents the closest parallel to our popular music. Each is highly developed entertainment, partaking of folk art and touching brilliantly on fine art. The masters admired Johann Strauss as composers now admire jazz. Any evaluation of jazz as the highest type of contemporary music because of its popular acceptance should also place Strauss above Chopin or Schubert. With this yardstick, too, such forgotten competitors of Beethoven as Hummel become his equals or superiors.

The deplorable falling away of an audience that met new music halfway is not at all held responsible by Mr. Pleasants for the alienation that has set in. The composer is entirely to blame.

Chairman of Graduate Studies in Music at Brandeis, Mr. Berger is a critic and composer.



Painting by Juan Gris. Courtesy of the Curt Valentin Gallery.